

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 6

Article 25

1988

Agrarian Angst: Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order*

Earl J. Wilcox
Winthrop College

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilcox, Earl J. (1988) "Agrarian Angst: Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order*," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 6 , Article 25.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol6/iss1/25

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

AGRARIAN ANGST: KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S *THE OLD ORDER*

Earl J. Wilcox

Winthrop College

Recent studies reassessing Katherine Anne Porter's life and work have focused on aspects long neglected in the relatively small but impressive body of criticism. Jan Nordby Gretlund's analysis, for example, clarifies various misconceptions about Porter's relationship to the South; yet Gretlund's study, like others before his, fails once again to consider one of her most abiding traits: her agrarianism.¹ In effect, commentary has taken the easy way out either by assuming no connection between Porter and the Nashville group or by neglecting the centrality of agrarian thought in many of her finest stories. Such neglect has resulted both in serious misreading of some of her fiction and in perpetuating the notion that Porter is not, finally, a "southern" writer. The Nashville Agrarians have certainly had their share of easy assessment; so has Porter. Even the reappraisal undertaken here risks being jejune since almost everyone has apparently decided that any Southerner writing since 1930 was probably influenced by Agrarian thought. Nevertheless, the case for Porter's agrarianism has not been carefully made, especially in her collection, *The Old Order*.

The history of the Agrarians has been well-told and needs little recapitulation here,² and Porter's fiction has also been canonized until she has almost become one of our major writers.³ But the untold story linking her to the Agrarians resides in some themes both share. The Agrarians' views, of course, are most fully stated in *I'll Take My Stand*,⁴ and Porter's in a well-spring of Old South memories, the short stories known as *The Old Order*. This collection includes six pieces grouped under the heading, "The Old Order," including her most famous short story, "The Grave." Also in the volume is that intriguing piece, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," and the novelette, "Old Mortality."⁵ The opening group and closing piece are Miranda stories, semi-autobiographical accounts using a protagonist whose life closely resembles Porter's own. Having been interviewed frequently about her early life, Porter draws the parallels between herself and Miranda most succinctly in her essay, "Portrait: Old South."⁶

As noted above, critics have generally called Porter a Southerner, though this label has caused some problems for critics since much of her fiction seems unlike William Faulkner's, Carson McCullers', or William Styron's. Elmo Howell, for instance, has difficulty justifying

240 AGRARIAN ANGST: *THE OLD ORDER*

her Southern ways because "...her Southernness is incidental if not extraneous to her purpose. One almost feels...that she achieves her end not because of it but in spite of her Southern background."⁷ But Porter is Southern "in her basic view of experience," and "she comes closest to an obvious identification with the main body of Southern letters in the concreteness of her fiction...."⁸ Howell concludes that as a Southern writer, Porter "is an anomaly, reaching out for implication, beyond the homey regional scene where after all she felt most at home."⁹ Similarly, John Bradbury comes directly to the point in placing Porter outside the influences of the Nashville group. He says "...she sharply rejects the conservative agrarian ideology...."¹⁰ In so far as *The Old Order* may be taken as representative of Porter's Southernness, one can show that both critics are mistaken.

Porter's biographical connections with the Agrarians are non-existent in any strictly formal sense. She apparently never commented publicly on reading the essays written by them, though she could hardly escape knowing the essays. After all, she was a close friend of Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate for over forty years; and Warren first "discovered" her in an important essay which brought her to the attention of others. Furthermore, despite her wide travels abroad, she lived for several years in Texas, in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana. It is not ultimately important to know absolutely whether or not Porter read *I'll Take My Stand*. We do know, on the other hand, she had read the meaning of her Southern heritage. About it, she says:

I'm a Southerner by tradition and inheritance, and I have very profound feeling for the South. And, of course, I belong to the guilt-ridden white-pillar crowd myself, but it just didn't rub off on me. Maybe I'm just not Jewish enough, or Puritan enough, to feel that the sins of the fathers are visited on the third and four generations.¹¹

In this confession lies the heart of Porter's ambivalence with which she deals in *The Old Order*. She is at once a part of the Old South and the new, and her sympathies blend with those of the Agrarians. The Agrarians have frequently been over-simplified, and at the risk also of falling into that trap, I attempt no summary of each essay here, nor is the intention here to reduce their complex attitudes to easy generalizations. Excellent studies have been made by Alex Karanikas and John L. Stewart.¹² However, the larger categories into which Agrarian thought may safely be analyzed are these: economics, traditions, aesthetics, religion, and myth. Compositely, these areas manifest the Agrarians' basic premise: that an encroaching

industrialization would displace Southern traditions, traceable to every aspect of its life, both public and private.

Prefaced by a Statement of Principles, *I'll Take My Stand* was a collection of twelve essays, including those by its most famous unreconstructed defenders, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Beginning earlier as the Fugitives, whose main concern had been the revitalization of Southern letters, these four and others defended the South against change and asserted that the Old Order was more desirable to the new.

In this cursory overview, details of essays have been neglected, though parallels between individual tenets and Porter's stories will be in evidence later. Three general areas between the stories and Agrarian thought may be fruitfully compared: Southern tradition (order), the family, and myth.

The strongest thrust of agrarianism is that the Old Order should be preserved. Obviously, there was no single Southern tradition, but some ideas are clear. The Agrarians said in their preface:

The amenities of life...suffer under the curse of a strictly business or industrial civilization. They consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love—in the social exchanges which reveal and develop sensibility in human affairs. If religion and the arts are founded on right relations of man-to-nature, these are founded on right relations of man-to-man.¹³

Implied here is that the family as an institution was the core of the Old Order; the idea is pervasive in Agrarian thinking and in Porter's stories. There is Grandmother, the source of order, now aged and living in town; but each spring she returns to the country literally to restore order to the plantation. Her homecoming is not "to the houses but to the black, rich soft land and the human beings living on it" (5). The Agrarians' sense of spirit ("man to nature and man to man") is captured in everything she does with her grandchildren and the Negroes living there. The Agrarians feared the South would lose its linguistic identity,¹⁴ and Porter's style seems bent on preserving it. Her narrator says "...Mister Miller didn't even take sugar in his own cawfy..." and "Bookser was acting like she was deaf ever since" (7). The ritual and language coalesce in the nostalgic scene within the household. Here, the spring cleaning uncovers a great horde of literature upon which both Ransom and Davidson felt the culture of the Old South rested: the big secretaries display "shabby old sets of Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Dr. Johnson's dictionary, the volumes of Pope and Milton and Dante and Shakespeare..." (7). A compelling aspect of Grannie's annual

242 AGRARIAN ANGST: *THE OLD ORDER*

spring journey is her mere presence, for she represents the stability and order of the Old South. Everyone loves her, the narrator says, because "she was the only reality to them in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge..." (8).

Next to Grannie as the source of the Old Order is old Nannie. Together the women offer an obvious contrast to the new, and the grandchildren "had arrived at the awkward age when Grandmother's quaint old-fashioned ways caused them acute discomfort" (12). Porter's poignant narration, then, depicts Grandmother and Nannie standing solidly for the old against the new: "They talked about the past...They would agree that nothing remained of life as they had known it, the world was changing swiftly..." (13). Little wonder that Ransom, Tate, and Warren as Agrarians were enthusiastic about Porter's fiction since Ransom's essay described the "unreconstructed Southerner" as one who "persists in regard for a certain terrain...a certain inherited way of living....He is like some quaint local character of eccentric but fixed principles...."¹⁵ Old Nannie's role is portrayed by both Porter and Warren alike. According to Warren, "The rural life provides the most satisfactory relationship of the two races which can be found at present, or which can be clearly imagined if all aspects of the situation are, without prejudice, taken into account."¹⁶ Nannie..."had no idea at all as to her place in the world. It had been assigned to her before birth, and for her daily rule she obeyed all her life the authority nearest to her" (14). The conversations of the two matriarchs forcefully align them with the Old Order and suggest Porter's sensitivity toward the Old South and the new: "They talked about religion, the slack ways the world was going nowadays, the decay of behavior, and about the younger children" (15). Like the Agrarians, the grannies have a fixed attitude toward all of life: "They had received education which furnished them an assured habit of mind about all important appearances of life, and especially about the rearing of young" (16).

Set against their fixed principles in the order of things is the new order, typified by the new daughter-in-law, who is a "tall, handsome, firm-looking young woman, with a direct way of speaking, walking, talking....The Grandmother was annoyed deeply at seeing how self-possessed the bride had been....But she was "too modern, something like the 'new' woman who was beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, leaving her house and going out in the world to earn her own living..." (22). Ironically, years later, Miranda, the person in "Old Mortality," discovers her cousin Eva has done exactly the same thing as a "new woman" and is a family outcast. Doubtless, Eva was one of those children who "went about their own affairs, scattering out and seeming to lose all that sense of family unity so precious to the Grandmother" (32). One feels that Porter's loving portrait of her own

grandmother in "Portrait: Old South" is evidence that this is no ironic praise of the matriarchs as the source for the Old Order.

Porter's affinities with Agrarian thought can be demonstrated in numerous details such as these. But her most vital relationship to them through these Miranda stories is the shared ambivalence. Perceptive readers of *I'll Take My Stand* see a realistic hesitancy on the part of almost every contributor to the volume to attribute an absoluteness or infallibility to the Old South. Even Mr. Davidson admitted the book "was intended to be a book of principles and ideas...for Americans in general, a philosophy of Southern life rather than a detailed programme."¹⁷ John Stewart, analyzing the literature that flourished after the movement, puts the matter more exactly:

Actually the writers of the Southern Renaissance inherited two kinds of South, two kinds of regional past. For a long time—well into the manhood of most of them—many people thought there had been only one Old South. But when the historians began to look at it, they found that this Old South was mostly a legend, that there actually had been many Old Souths. Recognition of the two kinds, the legendary and the actual, and of the great diversity of the latter was one of the unavoidable and definitive moments in the artistic maturing of these writers.¹⁸

In this complex dichotomy toward the Old and the new, Porter and the Agrarians share their most profound similarities. Repeatedly, the essays denounce the encroachment of industrialism, the claims of a positivistic science, and the ballyhoo of the chambers of commerce throughout the South. The new seemed bad; the old seemed good. From this angst, some literary historians have argued, was implanted the embryo for the birth of modern Southern letters, the Southern Renaissance to which Stewart refers. Miranda does feel at home in the old world, despite one critic who has her questioning its myths when she is only seven years old.¹⁹ Eventually, she leaves home, marries early, and discovers her mortality. In "Old Mortality," then, a sequel to "The Old Order," Porter explores Miranda's deepening rejection of the rituals and myths of her childhood. Yet Miranda has not found happiness in the new either. In more than a matter of speaking, she has swapped order for mortality.

Readers of the story know it as a continuation into later life of Porter's portrait of the artist as a young woman. It is indeed replete with ironic portraits of the Old South, the home of Miranda. But most of all the novella challenges two ideas: that the old was essentially bad and that the new is necessarily good. The Agrarians in later years

244 **AGRARIAN ANGST: *THE OLD ORDER***

would agree. Years after he had written "Remarks on the Southern Religion," Allen Tate also wrote "Ode to the Confederate Dead." The former is his Agrarian metaphor deriding a society partially committed to a religious ethic (the New South); the latter an agonizing poem depicting a modern Southerner with commitments to both the old and the new. Miranda is drawn to both her Aunt Amy and cousin Eva. The two worlds are crystallized in Eva, who "belonged to their everyday world of dull lessons to be learned..." and Amy, who "belonged to their world of poetry" (115). Eva is the "new" woman, feared by Granny and earlier admired by Miranda. Now she knows that neither world is hers. In watching the procession of cousins coming home for Uncle Gabriel's funeral,

Miranda found herself deliberately watching a long procession of living corpses, festering women stepping gaily toward the charnel house...and thought quite coldly, 'of course it was not like that. This is more true than what I was told before, it's every bit as romantic'...(174).

In this context Porter's often-quoted statement is voiced by Miranda, who in the midst of her angst gasps, "Ah, the family...the whole hideous institution should be wiped from the face of the earth. It is the root of all human wrongs..." (174). If, as some readers urge, Porter is rejecting the family here, she is rejecting the new *and* the old, not merely the old. Rather, one feels, she sees more clearly than ever that her own myth, religion, and traditions must guide her life. Like Tate's Southerner who stands at the cemetery gate, Miranda wonders with which world she belongs: "It is I who have no place," thought Miranda. "Where are my own people and my own time" (179)? Through the Fugitives and the Agrarians emerged the Southern Renaissance. Though Warren first saw the Negro in the briar patch, he later boldly asks, "Who speaks for the Negro?" And Ransom proclaimed he was reconstructed but unregenerate, yet his traveler finds no knowledge in the old mansion. Tate's weary sojourner, Aeneas in Washington, seeks a home both in the old and the new; while Mr. Davidson's modern citizen feels alien watching the fire on Belmont street.

In all these allegiances to both the Old and the New South, the Agrarians and Katherine Anne Porter demonstrate again the force that drives the artist in every age. The Agrarians felt for the longest time—Davidson until he died—that they might have been right. Porter has lived through the same agony of will and spirit. Miranda humbly concludes at the end of "Old Mortality":

What is the truth, she asked herself as intently as if the question had never been asked, the truth, even about the smallest, the least important of all the things I must find out? And where shall I begin to look for it? Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not on the past but the legend of the past, other people's memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child....Ah, but there is my own life yet to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer....Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself, making a promise to herself, in her...ignorance (182).

Some readers have found this ending unsatisfactory for a Southern writer because Miranda "must be saved by having her turn from provincial interest in traditional values to the more fashionable concern with isolation and identity."²⁰ Such a reading misses the impact of Miranda's self-evaluation. Rather, Porter shows her strongest alliance to Southern writers here. In Miranda's ignorance Porter gives her a richness and complexity which make her a genuine human being. This above all the Agrarians and Katherine Anne Porter sought for their world.

NOTES

¹Jan Nordby Gretlund, "Katherine Anne Porter and the South," *MissQ*, 34 (1981), 435-444.

²See Donald Davidson's "I'll Take My Stand: A History," *American Review*, 5 (1936), 301-321; Alexander Karanaikas, *Tillers of a Myth Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison, 1966); John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time, the Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, 1965).

³A brief history of critical opinion about Porter is found in the Introduction to *Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers: A Reference Guide* (New York, 1976). Robert Penn Warren's essay, "Katherine Anne Porter, Irony With a Center," *Kenyon Review*, 4 (1942), 29-42, brought her first appraisal by a major critic, though Allen Tate had earlier written a complimentary notice in "A New Star," *Nation*, 1 October 1930, pp. 352-353.

246 **AGRARIAN ANGST: *THE OLD ORDER***

⁴*I'll Take My Stand, The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners* (New York, 1930).

⁵*The Old Order* (New York, 1944). Quotations from the stories will be from this text.

⁶*Collected Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York, 1970), pp. 160-165. The best of the interviews is Barbara Thompson's "The Art of Fiction XXIX—Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview," *Paris Review*, 29 (1963), 87-114.

⁷"Katherine Anne Porter as A Southern Writer," *South Carolina Review*, 4 No. 1 (December 1971), 5.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920-196* (Chapel Hill, 1963), p. 71.

¹¹*Collected Essays*, p. 8.

¹²Cf. Note 1, above.

¹³*I'll Take My Stand*, p. xv.

¹⁴See for example, Donald Davidson's "A Mirror for Artists," (pp. 28-60) and Henry Blue Kline's "William Remington: A Study in Individualism" (pp. 302-327).

¹⁵"Reconstructed But Unregenerate," p. 1.

¹⁶"The Briar Patch," pp. 262-263.

¹⁷*I'll Take My Stand: A History*, pp. 303-304.

¹⁸Stewart, p. 96.

¹⁹See Richard Gray, *The Literature of Memory, Modern Writers of the American South* (Baltimore, 1977), p. 187.

²⁰Howell, p. 8.